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Into Free Poland Via Germany



Martha Chickering

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INTO FREE POLAND VIA GERMANY

By

MARTHA CHICKERING



OVERSEAS DEPARTMENT

NATIONAL BOARD OF THE
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Foreword

Miss Martha Chickering was leader of the first unit of Polish Grey Samaritans to be sent into Poland. Miss Chickering returned to the United States in November, 1919, after establishing the unit in Warsaw.

The Polish Grey Samaritans are the outcome of an idea suggested by Madame Laura G. de Turczynowicz when she came to the Y. W. C. A. in 1917. Madame Turczynowicz urged that Polish girls in America should be given training which would fit them for reconstruction service in Poland. Her suggestion was adopted, and recruits were sought throughout the country.

Polish probation courses were given in Cleveland, Trenton, Rochester, Milwaukee, Detroit, St. Louis, and Pittsburgh. Out of three hundred girls who took the probation courses, ninety qualified for the intensive course in the Polish Grey Samaritan School, equipped and opened on 53rd Street, New York City, October, 1918.

Two separate courses of study were planned:

Course I included health education and physiology, industrial history, social problems, institutional visiting, systematized housekeeping, bookkeeping, cooking, arts and crafts, English, Polish, gymnasium.

Course II included lecture work under the auspices of the School of Philanthropy, field work with the Charity Organization Society, child training with the Froebel League, health education, Polish, English, sys-

tematized housekeeping, bookkeeping, cooking, gymnasium.

The School closed its term of study on the seventh of June, 1919, with the graduation of seventy-five students.

Miss Lois Downs, of the Y. W. C. A. International Institute of Pittsburgh, Mrs. Thyrza Barton Dean and Mrs. Josefa Kudlicka, a Polish American, had been sent previously to Poland to arrange for establishing a unit of Grey Samaritans in Warsaw.

This unit, of twenty girls, sailed July 31, 1919, in charge of Y. W. C. A. Secretaries, Miss Chickering, Miss Frances West, Miss Emily Graves, and Miss Stephanie Kozlowska. The last three secretaries remained in Warsaw; Miss West as Recreation Director, Miss Graves as House Director, and Miss Kozlowska, who is a registered nurse, as Medical Director.

A second unit of ten girls will sail on December 11, 1919, in charge of Miss Amy Tapping and Miss Augusta Mettel, a registered nurse.

The Y. W. C. A., with the help of a \$10,000 donation from the Polish Reconstruction Fund, pays for the training, the transportation, the equipment and the maintenance (for four and one-half months) of these girls. At the end of the four and a half months' period the Polish Government, through the Central Children's Committee, will assume responsibility for them. This Committee was first called into being by the American Relief Administration, but was later taken over by the Ministry of Public Health, a department of the Polish Government.



The vanguard of the Polish Grey Samaritans, carrying relief to the land of their ancestors

INTO FREE POLAND VIA GERMANY

By MARTHA CHICKERING



IN JULY of this year, after months of intensive training and impatient waiting, twenty Polish Grey Samaritans (accompanied by three Y. W. C. A. counsellors and myself) at last turned their faces toward the land of their ancestors. Tales of the sufferings of Poland, especially among the children, had poured into America and tugged at the heart strings of these Polish-American girls.

After the armistice was signed Mr. Herbert Hoover had cabled his workers in America that he could not go away and leave the children of Europe as they were. The Children's Relief Committee was formed and Poland was named as the place of greatest need for children's work. Here was the opportunity for which the Polish Grey Samaritans had eagerly waited—the opportunity to give of themselves and of all they had learned in the service of their parent land. Mr. Hoover warmly endorsed the plan to bring a unit of Grey Samaritans to Warsaw, and we set sail on July 31st on the French liner, Rochambeau.

As we passed the Statue of Liberty, the girls sang a Polish song and the Star Spangled Banner. How many times in the eventful weeks ahead we turned back in memory to the Statue—and there were days when she



"Luncheon is served" on the freight de luxe to Poland

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seemed a long way off. Days in which we struggled with the beginning of Polish while the girls did the same with French, passed quickly, and we reached Paris expecting to proceed immediately to Warsaw.

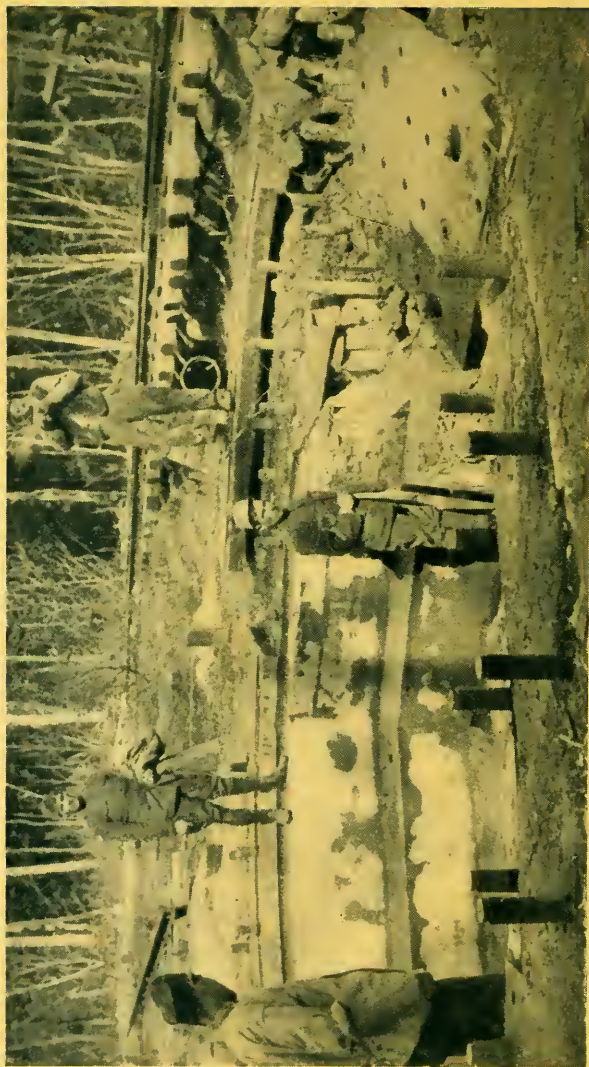
But—c'est l'armistice!

DIFFICULTIES OF JOURNEY

Travelling to Poland just wasn't done in such large groups apparently. We heard of many ways to get to Poland—we might go to England and work up to Copenhagen and thence in time find something going to Danzig. Or, we might go around by Trieste and perhaps get a train to Vienna and in time get to Warsaw. Or, if we would break up in small groups, we might, in the course of several weeks get ourselves to Warsaw on the very overworked Orient Express—the so-called "diplomatic train." But as a unit—twenty-four at a time—never!

While we were waiting a weary month in Paris, I divided the girls into groups of four and sent them to visit some of the battlefields of France—Rheims, Chateau Thierry and Belleau Wood—that they might become somewhat accustomed to the tragedy there before seeing the suffering and devastation in their own country. Many of the girls had had brothers at Belleau Wood, and after they returned from these trips they would come to me in my room and pour out the stories of the day, and through all their talk ran their idealism for America.

At last, through the courtesy of the Polish Typhus Mission, we were started from Coblenz straight across Germany in a German freight train. The Continental Y. M. C. A. had been good enough to detail Mr. Wag-



An American doughboy stands in the emplacement formerly occupied by Big Bertha

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goner, an American Y. M. C. A. man on his way to Poland, to go with us as escort. It would be hard to pay enough tribute to his tireless interest and care. Fifty-four cars we were—first, box cars, then flat cars, carrying delousing machines, traction engines and Fords, and there, at the end, the Polish Grey Samaritans tucked into two compartment cars with their trunks in a tired box car!

It was not exactly travelling de luxe, and food and water had to be snatched and passed at stops. But it was certainly novel, particularly as the girls decided that sitting on the Fords was the real way to travel, and the peasants in southern Germany will not soon forget the freight train that carried automobiles on flat cars, with girls in grey uniforms on the drivers' seats.

Then came the Polish border! Here was Poland—free Poland—after a year and a half of work and waiting, and weeks of travel—just over the line!

GERMANY

But the German Empire—or rather Republic—had its own ideas on the subject. Incidentally, it isn't always easy to remember that Germany is a republic when she has never taken the trouble to change her postage stamps from the pre-war "Deutsches Reich," and when one has confronted a German officer wearing the Iron Cross of Emperor William and directing soldiers of the republic.

But let that pass! The German *Republic* had its own ideas about letting us into Poland. Our freight was not paid any farther—the border had been moved eighteen kilometers east (by Germany) since we left Coblenz—



The "farmerettes" of Poland — farmers in grim reality

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the German engine could not take us farther, because it could not be trusted across the Polish border, etc. There were many reasons given us but no engine; and we were helpless.

So while the American captain in control of the train argued and expostulated, we lived in German freight yards, under guard, for five days and nights, cooking our food by the rails with the help of an American mess-sergeant who was one of the ten doughboys on the train. Much fun the girls made out of it, too—but not all fun. For behind the fun was concealed an anxiety which never left us, that the Germans might not be considerate of the girls, if they were known to be Polish, so we allowed no Polish spoken and no use of Polish names. On the track next us was an armored train, with machine guns and two big Austrian 75's—always with steam up, ready to go forth in pursuit of Poles if the constantly threatening border trouble should flare up. It was a highly suggestive neighbor.

What did we see in Germany? Peaceful fields, houses with all the bricks in regular sequence forming walls and roofs instead of ruined heaps, as in parts of France and most of Poland, and some barefoot women and children. We were told there was hunger in the big cities, but that there was such hunger as we saw in Warsaw, I find it hard to believe. In one place, the officers of the soldiers who guarded us put on civilian clothes and went home at night. We were told that these men were not soldiers—only volunteers. Perhaps that is Germany's way of keeping one million men under arms! One cannot tell much of a country by crossing it in three days and then living five days in its freight yards; but one cannot come out



In the heart of the city — the community mill of a Polish village

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of France, cross Germany and enter Poland without sad comparisons, and one cannot see the growing assurance of Germans as one goes east without asking, "What does this mean for Poland? Has Germany forgotten so soon that she was beaten last year?"

POLAND

Finally, an engine came and we crossed the border into Poland—free Poland! Polish soldiers in Polish uniforms were at the first station, and the girls saw the dream of generations of Poles realized at last. Austrian soldiers, German soldiers, Russian soldiers had been common enough in Poland, but the girls had seen Polish soldiers only in secret drill—the secret drills through which they hoped some day to overthrow the oppressor.

It was a day never-to-be-forgotten, and worth the long suspense—a triumphal ride across Posen, and finally into Warsaw. I think of Poland as a plain (there are very beautiful mountains in the south, but most of Poland is flat) with far horizons, woods that push straight up into the sky, roadside crosses that climb up and up like the woods—plain, austere, aspiring crosses, not ornate like most of Europe's shrines—and peasant folk with eyes that made more than one American say to me, "I have never seen so many kind eyes as in Poland." All of this, Poland, innately, is. Above all, Poland is a land of brave men and devoted women—eager patriots all—and the Polish Government is making wonderful strides in the face of terrific obstacles.

There are a few facts Americans should know about the Poland of to-day.



Towering high above the low-roofed peasant houses, the village church

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OUTSTANDING PROBLEMS IN POLAND

In the first place, Poland is at war, holding 1,500 kilometers of front against a highly organized Bolshevik army. And that war is partly *our* war because, if Germany ever establishes direct connection with the Bolshevik Government, we have reason to believe it will not be for our good. A strong Poland is the last thing Germany wants to see. Military hospitals in Warsaw are full of wounded today. Just before I left in October, notices of a new conscription appeared on the streets, and many youths of fifteen and sixteen were entering the ranks. I saw a boy of fourteen who had been in the trenches two years.

In the second place, whatever is true of post-bellum France is doubly true of war-ravaged Poland, but in the case of Poland there is no indemnity coming back. Like France, the country was stripped of its machinery and means of production. In one factory, which I visited, the Germans had carried away nine out of ten machines before they were interrupted. That factory is now running with the one machine. Poland has practically no raw materials with which to turn the wheels of those factories that can operate. Persons in Eastern Poland have lived on grass, and nothing but grass for weeks. At one of our stops a child eagerly seized a bit of meat which I had left on my plate, and hurried away to divide it with his companion. The bread for the army is driven through the streets under guard, that it may not be stolen.

In the third place, for more than a hundred years, Poland has been divided among three masters—Austria,



In their Sunday best before the village church

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Prussia, and Russia. At a peasant fair in Galicia I collected coins of Hungary, Austria, Russia, Germany and Poland, all in circulation. Under Russia, and somewhat under Germany, no Pole could hold public office, even to being connected in the most minor capacity with public utilities. This means that the citizens of Free Poland must learn self-government from the ground up—not only how to be mayors and presidents, but how to be street-car conductors and post-office clerks. More than all, it means that a people educated to three kinds of government must mould and adapt themselves to one.

In one village of Posen—formerly German Poland—the station master regretted that we were not to change engines in his district. "Here we would do it for you promptly, but further up the Russian Poles will promise you very politely, yes—but then they will not do it. Russian Poles are like that."

A Grey Samaritan girl upbraided him quickly. "You are no longer a country of Russian or German or Austrian Poles; you are all one people now. You should learn the spirit of unity from America."

To Poland, America is the saviour nation, representing the essence of philanthropy and practical idealism. Pictures of Mr. Hoover can be found in nearly every shop window. President Wilson's illness was felt as a national calamity. Mr. Gibson, the American minister, is universally esteemed. No hospitality is too great to be extended to Americans.

At one of our stopping places we were entertained at dinner by a family formerly well-to-do and prominent socially. The dinner of several courses was excellent.



The pig walks into the family portrait

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We mentioned casually that the coffee was particularly delicious. Our host then admitted that this coffee had been saved by his wife since before the war for some "special occasion." And this bit of coffee had been saved even though Austrian, Russian and German armies had been successively billeted on them, and then given to us as Americans! We later discovered that, after our departure, the family returned to its usual daily food of potatoes and sour milk.

When it was learned that our Grey Samaritans had come to offer themselves and their training to the land of their ancestors, nearly every city in Poland which had medical work petitioned for them.

The Mayor of Kalisz asked to have two of these girls come to his city simply to strengthen the morale of his discouraged workers. I chose the two girls I thought best fitted for the task, and learned only ten minutes before they were to start that one of them had arranged to meet her fiancé, a soldier in the Polish Army, that week end. She had not seen him since 1917 when he enlisted in the Polish Army in America, and she might not be able to arrange another meeting for months. When I asked her why she had not told me of her plans, she answered, "Miss Chickering, I came over here to help Poland, not for my personal pleasure."

WARSAW

It was finally decided to keep all of the girls in Warsaw, the capital. Warsaw is a beautiful city—not large, and, like many European cities to-day, seriously overcrowded. It has beautiful parks, buildings, monuments.



Home from the bread line on a winter's day

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As has been written again and again, it has some of the most charming and cultivated people in the world. The Poland which gave us Chopin and Paderewski, Copernicus, Sinkiewicz and Mickiewicz is not yet dead, any more than the Poland which gave us Kosciuszko. Even in its suffering, Warsaw's windows are full of beautiful etchings and paintings, and shops of artists' materials are abundant. Opera in Warsaw—particularly the revived national Polish operas like "Halka"—is very beautiful. Moreover, Warsaw is forging up hill, not slipping down. When Miss Downs came into Warsaw in June, she said it was a rare thing to see the Polish working people in shoes; now, about half have shoes, if not stockings. Some food, clothing, soap, tobacco and raw materials have come in.

Even so, when I close my eyes, certain pictures rise in my mind, not because they were rare and striking incidents, but because I saw them repeated again and again, until they were burned into my memory: a woman barefoot, leaning against a wall, too weary to lift her eyelids enough to let you see the despair in her eyes; a man (or a child, or a woman) hurrying down the streets hugging his loaf of bread for which he had waited hours in the bread-line; funerals, all too often with a baby's tiny casket on the bare frame of the dray which is a Polish hearse; children begging for bread; a child looking through the window to watch you eat; a city of people not perhaps starving to death (though we found such even in the three weeks I was there) but on the acute edge of want, and watching with gray apprehension the merciless drawing down of winter.



A Polish Marguerite

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Into conditions such as this came our girls—eager, able, devoted and ready to face any hardships, any difficulties for Poland.

FINIS

Two of them were put in charge of a nursery in a refugee camp. Added to its other problems, Poland has fifteen camps of refugees from all Eastern Europe. The one I visited had two thousand people there at the time, and had had over one hundred thousand pass through its barracks during the war.

Two other girls took another nursery.

The other sixteen were set to visiting in the homes of the families of Polish soldiers in order to report cases of acute want.

It was like watching an army dig in, wait a bit to test the strength of its opponent, and then attack.

The second day, a baby died in one nursery. Some were desperately sick from malnutrition in the other. Then the girls attacked. All they had learned, all their intelligence, all the love that poured through their eager Polish-American hearts into the saving of Polish babies were pitted against death. And in the short three weeks I was there, the death-rate of their nurseries had fallen fifty per cent.

With the approach of winter, ten soup kitchens will be opened under The Central Children's Committee, of which Mme. Helena Paderewska is chairman. The girls will direct each kitchen Food and the minor medical care which can change conditions so radically will be given the children.

There is an appalling amount of eye-infection and tuberculosis among the children. Out of two thousand



“United we stand”: America and Poland at the Polish Grey Samaritan headquarters at Warsaw

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school children examined, practically all had tuberculosis in one form or another. In the case of these diseases, our girls will attempt to teach the victims the simpler rules of care and prevention.

Of course, we cannot expect twenty girls to meet all of the vast needs of the war-bled city, but what we believe they can and will do, is (1) to set a standard for child welfare work for Poland, and (2) build up scientific social service based on the case work method. (Statistics were frowned upon under Russia, so a survey is difficult to make but, as nearly as we could find out, the death-rate of children in Warsaw seemed to be about twenty-five per cent).

The Polish Grey Samaritans and their service are America's gift to Poland through the Y. W. C. A. We have taken of Poland's own youth, trained it, and now given it back to the mother land. These girls bring skill, a knowledge of the Polish language, an understanding of Polish traditions and an unbreakable devotion to the land of their ancestors.

But they bring still more.

A woman who spoke English met one of the girls with me one day, a girl whose residence in America did not span a dozen years. "But she speaks Polish!" the woman said to me in surprise. "Yes, truly—she *is* Polish," I replied. The woman turned and looked at the girl again, wistfully. "Ah, yes," she said, to herself, not to me, "she is Polish, but yes, she has lived in America and freedom shines in her."

The Polish Grey Samaritan brings to Poland, above all else, the spirit of democracy—America's ideal of liberty.

